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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 003964

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STATE FOR EAP, EAP/MTS, EAP/RSP

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL RP BM

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR ENGAGES PHILIPPINE FOREIGN SECRETARY ON BURMA, MILF PEACE TALKS, AND U.S. RELATIONSHIP

REF: MANILA 3875 (DEMARCHE: PHILIPPINES TO CONSIDER A

STRONGER STAND ON BURMA)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1.** (C) SUMMARY: In a December 17 private breakfast, the Ambassador and Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo discussed Burma, assessed the peace process in Mindanao, and explored opportunities to strengthen U.S.-Philippine ties. Romulo, who was frank and relaxed, inquired about the prospects of a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2008. He expressed hope that President Arroyo would be able to visit President Bush's Texas ranch, either with ASEAN countries or under a different umbrella. Regarding the peace process in Mindanao, Romulo characterized recent difficulties as "solvable." On Burma, Romulo reiterated President Arroyo's statements that the Philippines could reject the ASEAN Charter if the Burmese regime did not release Aung San Suu Kyi and begin democratic reform. END SUMMARY.

BURMA REMAINS KEY ISSUE

**¶2.** (C) In Romulo's estimation, the Philippine Senate may refuse to ratify the Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) if Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) is not released and the Junta does not adopt democratic reforms. The assessment matched President Arroyo's public statements that ASSK's release would be the "number one" benchmark in deciding whether to ratify the ASEAN Charter. Romulo expressed the hope that perhaps a new Thai government would prompt ASEAN to place more pressure on the Burmese regime to democratize. He noted that during President Arroyo's recent trip to Europe, she was widely praised for her stance on Burma. The Ambassador thanked Romulo for the Philippine government's courageous policy on Burma and reminded Romulo about a UN Burma human rights resolution scheduled for a plenary vote this month. She suggested the Philippines could send a strong and consistent message if it broke from practice and voted in favor of the Burma resolution (reftel). Romulo was amenable to the idea and said he would raise it with others.

U.S.-PHILIPPINE VISITS

**¶3.** (C) Romulo reminded the Ambassador that the Philippines would be delighted to send a delegation to the President's ranch in Crawford, Texas, for an ASEAN meeting. The Ambassador noted that the Burmese Junta's brutal actions made it extremely difficult to consider hosting all the ASEAN

members, and that some ASEAN members might not support an ASEAN meeting from which Burma was excluded. Romulo then suggested the possibility of the U.S. inviting the Philippines in a different context, such as with key members of the broader ASEAN Regional Forum. Similarly, Romulo added that the Philippine government would welcome a visit by Secretary Rice in 2008. Romulo said that he had proposed the

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idea to the Secretary when they last spoke and she had expressed interest. The Ambassador noted the Secretary's demanding travel schedule but agreed to stay in touch as her travel plans developed in 2008.

EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS

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¶14. (C) The Ambassador noted the significant drop in reported cases of extrajudicial killings reported in 2007 but observed that more had to be done. Romulo acknowledged that the Philippines needed to make progress in prosecuting cases of extrajudicial killings. Similarly, Romulo admitted that corruption was a widespread problem in the Philippines. However, he explained that such problems were just as common in neighboring countries but received more attention from the international community here because the Philippines had a free, English-speaking press. Romulo recognized that these factors would not change and the Philippines would continue to be held to a high standard by the international community.

MILF-GOVERNMENT PEACE TALKS

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¶15. (C) Romulo remained sanguine about the Philippine government's peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), despite recent difficulties in peace talks in Kuala Lumpur. Romulo said that Rodolfo Garcia, Chairman of

MANILA 00003964 002 OF 002

the Peace Panel, shared his view that the aborted negotiations would eventually resume and that difficult issues were unfortunate, but natural. The Ambassador praised recent movement in the process but observed that the parties had to find ways to narrow the gaps. She expressed hope that 2008 would be a key year in moving the process forward.

SHIP VISITS

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¶16. (C) Romulo thanked the Ambassador for the many successful visits of U.S. naval ships to the Philippines. He hoped the visits would continue apace and looked forward to the 2008 visit of the USNS Mercy, though he asked whether a U.S. aircraft carrier could visit the Philippines as he would love the chance to get on board. The Ambassador told Romulo our ship visit program was a testament to U.S. commitment to the Philippines and underscored the strength of our bilateral relationship.

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KENNEY